

REMARKS FOR THE SECOND NATIONAL DISTRACTED DRIVING SUMMIT

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood
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As Prepared for Delivery

Good morning. Thank you, Peter, for the introduction and your tireless work to bring this gathering to life. Thank you for joining us, Secretary Solis and honored guests. A special hello to the people participating remotely on www.distracted.gov, particularly the students. And welcome, everyone, to the Second National Distracted Driving Summit.

It's hard to believe a year has passed since we first came together and began the work of assessing and addressing America's distracted driving crisis. And it's hard to believe that we've come so far, so fast, in our campaign to end it.

This became a personal crusade for me about a year ago, during and after last year's Distracted Driving Summit. We had invited victims' families to Washington to tell their stories. More than 300 people came and listened. Thousands more participated over the internet. And while it's one thing to hear from researchers, academics, and law enforcement officers, it's another to hear from the parents, children, and siblings of people who were needlessly killed.

That night, I spent time with three of those people: Jennifer Smith and Dave and Judy Teater. We were scheduled to participate on a cable news program and had a long discussion before it started. During that conversation, Jennifer, Dave, and Judy convinced me that we should create a group like Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The idea for FocusDriven -- the first national advocacy group devoted to ending distracted driving -- was born. And during the year since, Jennifer, Dave, Judy, and FocusDriven's other members have traveled the country doing important and inspiring work -- putting a human face on a terrible problem.

At last year's summit, we learned that distracted driving is an epidemic. It's an epidemic because everyone has a cell phone -- and everyone thinks they can use it while driving. They can't.

Every single time someone takes their focus off the road -- even if just for a moment -- they put their lives and the lives of others in danger. Distracted driving is unsafe, irresponsible, and, in a split second, its consequences can be devastating. There's no call or email so important that it can't wait.

According to a new National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report, distracted driving-related crashes caused nearly 5,500 deaths and 450,000 injuries during 2009. We believe that this data represents only the tip of the iceberg because police reports in many places do not routinely document whether distraction was a factor in vehicle crashes.



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Either way, the victims aren't statistics. They're moms and dads; sons and daughters. The men and women in this audience who have planned funerals instead of birthdays or weddings will tell you exactly what's at stake.

Still, the situation is not without hope. We've seen that drivers can and do change their behaviors. For instance, we've told Americans to click it or get a ticket. And we've seen seatbelt use increase to 85 percent, up from 60 percent only 15 years ago.

We've reminded Americans that if they're over the limit, they'll be under arrest. And although driving under the influence is still a serious problem, we've seen drunk driving fatalities decline by almost 20 percent between 2006 and 2009.

When we stop for a moment and ask "why," we see the ingredients of a recipe that can also prove effective against distracted driving: Tougher laws, more effective enforcement, public education, and personal responsibility.

Today, we're announcing three new actions consistent with this formula. One – At last year's summit, we proposed a rule banning commercial bus and truck drivers from texting on the job. Today, that proposal becomes the law of the land. Two – Last year, we proposed a rule restricting train operators from using cell phones and other electronic devices while in the conductor's seat. Today, that proposal also becomes final regulation. And three – We're initiating a new rulemaking that will limit commercial truck drivers' use of all electronic devices while transporting hazardous materials. This proposed rule has now been posted. We encourage the public to comment.

Of course, no matter what government does, we can't break America's addiction to distracted driving by ourselves. We need the business community's leadership too. Among the important success stories of the last year are the thousands of U.S. companies that have imposed distracted driving policies of their own.

One partner in this effort is the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety, or NETS, an alliance of major corporations, including many on the *Fortune 500* list. NHTSA helped establish NETS more than 20 years ago – and they're driven by the idea, as their chairman Bill Windsor puts it, that "corporate cell phone policies are essential pieces of employee safety equipment."

From October 4 through 8, 2010, NETS will hold their annual *Drive Safely Work Week*, during which they'll remind businesses about the importance of safe driving.

But I'm also pleased to announce some exciting news. In advance of this summit, DOT joined with NETS to survey American businesses about their distracted driving policies. We discovered that 1,600 companies and organizations, covering approximately 10.5 million workers across the country, have already adopted such policies. And we helped persuade 550 additional companies and organizations, covering 1.5 million more employees, to adopt similar measures during the next year. This is not a bad step towards our goal: Every employer in America discouraging workers from driving while talking or texting.



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From our other private sector friends – whether in the wireless, insurance, or automotive industries – we’ve seen a number of constructive measures. The Wireless Association and individual insurance companies have been vocal in reminding the public not to message behind the wheel. That’s a start. We’re grateful. Auto companies have supported laws that ban drivers from texting or talking on a handheld device while driving. The public is safer for it.

But friends are honest with each other and I think it’s fair to say that we all must go further. In recent days and weeks, we’ve seen news stories about carmakers adding technology in vehicles that lets drivers update Facebook, surf the Web, or do any number of other things instead of driving safely. But facts are facts: Features that pull drivers’ hands, eyes, and attention away from the road are distractions. Period. So, I’m going to meet with and work with the auto companies to develop new safety guidelines for technology in vehicles. Together, let’s put safety before entertainment. And let’s ensure that advances in innovation go hand-in-hand with progress toward decreases in distraction-related deaths and injuries.

Still, laws, guidelines, rules, and regulations do little good if we don’t enforce them. So we at DOT are running two pilot programs – one in Hartford, Connecticut, and the other in Syracuse, New York – that test whether high visibility enforcement can change drivers’ behavior. The early data show they can. According to a new NHTSA research note, available today, handheld cell phone use in the driver’s seat has dropped 56 percent in Hartford and 38 percent in Syracuse – and texting behind the wheel declined 68 percent in Hartford and 42 percent in Syracuse.

Now, one of the things that’s been encouraging to watch during the last year is the groundswell of grassroots support for our cause. Local “Just Hang It Up” pledge drives and groups like Moms Send the Message are spreading the word, far and wide, that the only safe way to get from one place to another is to hang up and drive.

The entertainment industry is leading the charge too. During the National Football League preseason, ESPN plastered the message “Stop Distracted Driving” on the side of their tour buses as they logged 15,000 miles traveling from training camp to training camp. The Jonas Brothers and *American Idol* winner Jordin Sparks participated in Allstate Insurance’s “X the TXT” campaign. Oprah Winfrey lent an entire television show to telling victims’ stories and promoting “National No Phone Zone Day.” Webster’s Dictionary even selected Distracted Driving as its “Word of the Year” for 2009.

At the same time as Americans called for action, government took notice, as Peter mentioned. Last year alone, legislatures in 43 states considered more than 270 distracted driving bills. During 2010, twelve states outlawed texting behind the wheel and two banned handheld cell phone use – bringing our nationwide totals to 30 states that have banned texting and eight that have banned handheld use behind the wheel. The President of the United States prohibited all federal employees – a 4 million person workforce – from texting while driving.

Even the United Nations got in the game. Last spring, I stood with Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon at U.N. Headquarters as he imposed a directive barring the U.N.’s 40,000 employees from text messaging while operating vehicles on official business.



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So, in all these ways, the last year has been a very positive one. I can't think of another safety issue in American history that's gained so much traction in such a short period of time. But we still haven't solved the problem. Not by a long shot. And you don't need to take my word for it.

We have several people with us today who have suffered directly as a result of distracted driving. I'd like them to stand and be recognized. Thank you for joining us and for turning the worst moment of your life into the resolve to save others. I can't do justice to all of your stories, but, with your permission, I'd like to tell a few.

Robert and Eilene Okerblom, from Santa Maria, California, lost their 19-year-old son Eric in 2009. Eric was a National Merit Scholar, majoring in molecular biology at Cal-Berkeley. He was riding his bike during the middle of the day when a young woman's pickup truck struck him. She was texting in the driver's seat.

Amos Johnson, from Asheville, North Carolina, lost his 16-year-old daughter Ashley earlier this year. She was on her way to work, when she lost control, crossed the center line, and hit a pickup truck head-on. Although Amos had warned his daughter about the dangers of distracted driving, she was texting at the time of the crash.

One final story: Russell and Kim Hurd are here from Abingdon, Maryland. In 2008, their 26-year-old daughter Heather, and her fiancé Patrick, left their Florida home to meet their families at a Disney World wedding-planner's office. Heather and Patrick both worked at the park and dreamed of a fairy-tale ceremony in the Magic Kingdom. On the way, they stopped at a traffic light, when a truck driver plowed his tractor trailer into the back of a car, setting off a chain reaction that left Heather and another woman dead. That driver was texting behind the wheel.

Eric. Ashley. Heather. They – and thousands like them – came from all parts of the country. They had bright futures. They were the kinds of kids that every parent hopes for. They were the kinds of parents that every child adores. And their too-short lives were punctuated with a question mark. How many people need to die on America's roadways? How many people need to die on our watch – not because of evil or malice, but because of carelessness?

During this last year, many of you have been part of a rising choir that is shouting: "Enough." Today we, together, will take measure of how far we have come – and the distance we have yet to travel.

Share what you're doing. Share what you've learned. Ask questions. Listen to new ideas. Come up with some new ideas of your own. But know this: We are in this together. We will solve this together. We will not let up until distracted driving is a behavior of the past.

